

Presenting Some Evidence That Even the Shrewd May Be Fleeced Sometimes by the Professional Sure-Thing Man

A CHORUS girl had named him. She didn't know him, except as the man who signed the pay voucher, but then that's a great deal. He didn't look like the name, didn't act like it, wasn't a papa; dressed in the quiet, business-like style which is supposed to be entirely foreign to circus grafters, and at times could be exceedingly sour. To wit, alighting from his private car and standing a moment on the bottom step in contemplative disgust as he surveyed the railroad approaches to the metropolis of Blue Ridge, Ohio, meanwhile waiting until Bart Edwards, the fixer, should approach to a very private conversation.

The fixer was tall and well built and dressed in a manner which gave the impression that he might own a circus. His job consisted of the task of persuading city councils to admit that when a man tries to get something for nothing and loses, he in reality is not gambling. It also included the vocation of inducing justicemakers of the peace to take a one-day vacation on circus dates, buying new hats for sheriffs, accepting liability in attachment suits, restoring lost, bawling children to wild-eyed mothers; reducing license fees, settling the damages of the inevitable runaway and other duties demanding the presence of some one conspicuous, some one who could be pointed out, found at any moment, easily identified and of a type distinctive.

Sweetie Papa looked as if he might run a respectable neighborhood cash and carry or own a last year's automobile. His eyes were mild and blue and retreating in their gaze; his manner was innately apologetic; his clothing of that cut which tailors make for men who have ceased looking for jobs. Sweetie Papa owned the show and he owned Bart Edwards. And more, he owned the brains which allowed a grafting organization, carrying all those mild educational devices such as the "big joint," the old, familiar, three shells, the "Cologne Joint" with its "capital cash county advertising prize," the "knock-down pins," the faro box, "O'Leary's Bet," and a number of other "stores" of inconspicuous but highly lucrative returns, to operate as a family circus, with an excellent name for truth, quietude, uprightness and satisfying performance. Sweetie Papa's circus was all that one could desire from a point of morality, cleanliness and safety for the young observer. But for the man whose blood ran red hot and who thought he knew more about a roulette wheel than the fellow who only that morning had tested the batteries—well, that was a different matter. All of which had a bearing upon the lugubrious expression of Flier Bart as he came forward and grasped at the brass rail of the private car steps.

"Thought I'd better tip off Three Card Monte to tell the crowd at the lot to stay under cover unless you passed 'em in the office," he began. "You had the dope."

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A ND Sweetie Papa beat it, there to find Three-Card Monte swinging toward him.

"There's a fellow around here looking for you. Says he's an old pal of yours."

"So?" Sweetie raised his eyebrows. "Give his name?"

"Jordan."

Sweetie's mild eyes lost their worried look.

"Where is he?"

"Over by the kid show, talking to Larry Glead. Stalls that he's an old showman."

Sweetie went forward then, toward the ballyhoo stand, and the big, black-appearing man whom he saw there. Then, ten feet away, he stopped.

"Hello, Blackbird," came shortly. The big man turned and came bounding toward him.

"Jimmy," he exclaimed, hand extended. "Good to see you, honest it is! Guess you heard about me fixing up the license for you? Huh?"

"Yeah. What's behind it?" Sweetie Papa had grasped the extended hand limply, then dropped it. "How much is it going to cost me?"

"Cost you? For fixing up a little think like a license? Nothing? What's the matter with you?"

"Tightness of the pocketbook when you're concerned, Blackie."

Blackbird Jordan stood back and laughed.

"You ain't letting that little set of ours eat on you, are you?"

"Me? Oh, no. There's nothing left to eat. But I'm remembering it. Never thought I'd see you out here. I was kind of looking around for you down at the bank."

"Were you in there?"

"No," Sweetie said it mildly. "I stayed outside. Kind of hated to go where I could hear all those poor nickels and dimes howling for mercy. Got a long way on my money, didn't you, Blackie?" Then he changed his tactics. "It sure was swell of you to make that little offer through the chief of police."

"Thanks." Blackbird accepted the gratitude calmly. "If you want anything like that fixed up around here, I'll look after it. I'm pretty well in the know here."

"Seems so. You always were. Out of the circus game for good, huh?"

"Except for today. It gets in your blood, don't it?"

Blackbird's eyes glittered as he said it, and he stared about the circus lot, at the vari-colored marquee, where the roughnecks were placing in position the steel "gates" preparatory to receiving the crowds of the afternoon; the flying pennants atop the center poles of the menagerie and the big top; the wagons, scattered about the lot, the deserted horse tents and dressing tops, vacant now as their occupants trailed their way through the downtown streets as a part of the parade. There was a nervous fidgetiness in his gait, the half-excited bearing of a man who feels the tug of adventure, and knows that he is anchored. At last he turned to look down into the mildly scrutinizing eyes of Sweetie Papa, then, with a sudden effusiveness, reached out and banded his big hands on the smaller one's shoulders.

"Sure. You feel good to be back on the lot, Jimmy? Sure feels good. And later, he looked carefully over his shoulder, then bent close, "Want to cut in on the big money?"

"Nope," Sweetie said it very quietly and very firmly. Blackbird stared.

"But this is the goods—the real stuff. Honest! I've been waiting for you for ten days. I've got a live one. Yeah, I heard you say that once before. It cost me 30,000 bucks. Let's change the subject. Whatever became of Lou?"

"Lou? Lou who?"

"Lou Jordan. Your wife."

"Oh," Blackbird grinned. "Hadn't thought about her for years. What made you ask?"

"Nothing. Only I met the kid a couple of weeks ago."

"My kid, you mean?"

"She don't admit it."

"Uh-huh."

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Oh, well," Blackbird shrugged his shoulders as though to dismiss the subject, "I guess that's natural. She wasn't more'n three or four when me and Lou split up, and, of course, Lou'd put a lot of stub in her head. That's been pretty near twenty years ago. If ever a woman done a man dirt, Lou done it to me. Know what she wanted?" Blackbird became vehement. "Huh? Tried to stick me for fifty a month alimony for her and the kid. Yeah, she did!"

"Cut it? How?"

"Can't prove it by me. All I know is that about a half hour ago the license clerk comes busting out to the lot and looked me up. Asked me if I'd go down to the city hall with him for a minute. When I got there he hands me back a century note and tells me that a good friend of ours in town here had pointed out the fact that a circus right at this time was a wonderful advantage to the merchants in getting the folks into town and that there ought to be a rebate on the license."

Sweetie Papa's eyes twinkled.

"Wonder if Blackbird's framing to take us off our guard, so he can hand out a wallop like an ostrich's kick."

"And the cut in the license ain't all."

"No?"

"You said it. I'm busting out of the city hall when I run into the chief of police. He takes me off to one side and asks me if I've got any stores with the show. I stalled like I didn't know what he was talking about. Then he came out halfcocked and asked me if we didn't carry a little gambling."

"And you said—"

"That if you did, you sure—well, it

FINESSE



THE FUNDS OF THE COMBINATION HAD FALLEN PERCEPTIBLY.

"Then, listen. This sucker that I've got in tow—"

"Lou was sure a swell little woman," Sweetie Papa broke in. "She sure was, Blackie. The only trouble with you was that you didn't appreciate her. Now—"

"But who's talking about Lou? I ain't. I don't care nothing about her and I never did. What I was saying was that this sucker—"

"That's just it, Blackie. You never cared anything about her and you never appreciated her. Lou was sure too fine a woman to be hooked up with a grifter like you—one that's even turned his friend for a piece of change."

"Who ever turned a friend?"

"Oh, I'm not mentioning any names. But it seems to me that I remember a fellow like you coming to me in Salt Lake and putting up just the same sort of stall that you're trying to slip over today—all you're trying to do is to get a sucker that was willing to part with some real money. If I remember right, just about the time everything got to going good, there was a fight in front of the kidshow that somebody or other'd arranged, and while I'm out straightening it up, somebody switched the cards in the faro box, and I come back to get trimmed for 30,000 bucks by this poor, simple sucker who'd been touted up to me as not knowing one card from another. And then—just correct me if I'm wrong—then this good friend of mine that I'd gotten out of jail more times than once and talked my fool head off trying to make him appreciate a good wife who wanted to make a gentleman out of him, instead of a petty barony cheap skater—ah, I say, this good friend ups and trims his confederate, cops the whole thirty thousand and blows town and the circus business and everything else. Of course, Blackie, I wouldn't mention names for a million dollars, but some way or other, when I met the kid the other day and she told me what a bum her father was, well, you know how it is—a person always likes to have somebody else chiming in with 'em when they're telling their troubles."

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"I know, but this ain't a two-dollar play, and a blowout when the sucker loses his week's wages. This is regular game—he's got fifty thousand bucks on deposit right down in my bank now—in cash! Get that? In cash! He calls it pocket money!"

"That is, you think you've got a sucker. Real live sucker—"

"That's nothing. A lot of 'em slip for that."

"I know, but this ain't a two-dollar play, and a blowout when the sucker loses his week's wages. This is regular game—he's got fifty thousand bucks on deposit right down in my bank now—in cash! Get that? In cash! He calls it pocket money!"

"I'm willing to back it with money."

"Huh? What's that?" Sweetie Papa straightened. "How much?"

"Fifty-fifty on the risk and fifty-fifty on the winnings. There ain't anything fairer than that, is there?"

"Blackbird's voice was high, excited whisper. "Fifty thousand dollars, I'm telling you! Roll that over your tongue once and see how it sounds!"

But Sweetie Papa shook his head.

"I know just exactly what it sounds like we ever make a move, won't you?"

"You?" Sweetie Papa stared. "You saw two figures approaching.

"All right, Monte. Start 'em up."

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THREE CARD faded past the ballyhoo stand. The figures came closer, Blackbird Jordan pointing out the banners behind the ticket sellers and going through all the set formulas of the regulation gambling career, while beside him a flashily dressed young man talked in animated, know-it-all style, and allowed himself to be led onward. Sweetie Papa ducked into the sideshow, strolled under the painted pieces of sidewalk, and then, while Three Card Monte, with two other shillers, or cappers, beside him moved forward, took his place at the "knock-down pins," and began a droning conversation.

"I'm here to lose, you're here to win. Easy to play, nothing to learn, nothing to deceive. Knock down the little pins, boys, and count 'em up. Every winning number brings you one to one. Five for one, everybody. You lose little and win big—knock 'em down, boys, knock 'em down."

Saying which, he knocked down the pins, counted the numbers of the painted squares into which their heads fell, then with a pull on a lever set the pins up again.

"Every time they're knocked down somebody wins!" came his droning voice again. "Here you are—try your luck!"

Three-Card Monte drew a bill from his pocket and placed it on the board. Blackbird Jordan and the flashily dressed young man had just come under the sidewalk. Sweetie Papa looked inquiringly around.

"Anybody else now? Odd numbers pay you double, even numbers three for one, and you can have five numbers. What's fairer, what's easier, what's simpler? Lay your bets, gentlemen, lay your bets."

One after the other the shillers placed their money on the table. The pins were knocked down. In streaming sequence, Sweetie counted:

"Sixteen—eighteen—nineteen—thirty-nine—sixty-one! Sixty-one and odd. The odd wine. Who bet on the odd? oh, yes, right here."

"And I had sixty-one."

"Sixty-one pays!" Sweetie Papa passed out the money. "Sixty-one wins and—"

For there was object in that turnaway. In that second the gamekeeper was the flashily dressed young man, and he was reaching into a pocket. The circus owner stared.

"Depends what you call real money?"

"I've got a hundred that says I can guess 'em."

"I've got more than that to say you can't. Put up!"

"How about five hundred, as a teaser?"

"Just as you please."

"And four hundred more to make it a thousand."

"It's your game!"

"Knock 'em down!" The young man had placed his bets on the table. A sweep of the arm and Sweetie had scattered the pins. Again he started to count:

"Five—nine—"

"Forty-three. I win!"

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THE addition had come almost before Sweetie could look at the squares into which the pins had fallen. He stared suddenly at Blackbird Jordan and gasped. It is part of the pin game to outcount the sucker, to add up the numbers so swiftly that he has no chance to see whether the gamekeeper is right or wrong, then to sweep the pins back into position before the total can be verified. But this time the stranger had done the outcounting, even before Sweetie Papa had gotten a good start! What was more, the stranger had been correct.

"Suppose I run away with that twenty-five thousand?"

"You? That's just what makes me sore about it. If it was you, you'd be studying metables already."

"Can't you tell bygones be bygones, Jimmy? What say?"

"Trot out the money," and the Blackbird loped away.

A half hour later, a hurrying bank messenger sought out Sweetie Papa on the circus lot, and the little show-owner signed a receipt. And thirty minutes after that, Sweetie Papa, fingered a roll which contained \$3,000 of Blackbird's money, turned quickly toward Three Card Monte and said:

"I don't like this game," he burst out. "Let's try."

"But I do," came from the flashy young man. "I like it a lot. I'm five thousand to the good."

"I know—but you're liable to be five thousand to the bad in a minute if you keep it up. Can't you see he's leading you on?" Blackbird confided in a whisper. "Let's try something different." They were aloud: "Ain't you got anything else?"

"We strive to please," groaned Sweetie Papa, meanwhile boring a couple of holes through Blackbird Jordan with his unusually mild eyes, and incidentally drawing three little English walnut shells from a pocket. "I have here the old reliable fenders. You will observe the three little shells and the little pea. Now, by a simple twist of the wrist, we change the position—"

But the talk counted for little. The action was far more important. When they led the flashily dressed young man away from the three-shell game the funds of the Blackbird-Sweetie Papa combination had fallen perceptibly—and Sweetie Papa's eyes were speaking encyclopedias in the direction of Blackbird Jordan, who pretended not to see. They went on to the dropcase, with an actual five minutes of slight reconstruction of the partnership roll. Then the flashy young man decided to plunge. And about the same time he began to win. Desperately Sweetie Papa turned the conversation to a new game and a new chance at victory—and made a mistake.

For again it was one of those amusing devices where the sucker bets his money on the little squares of a big table and awaits the counting of ten dice as they are thrown from the box, under ordinary circumstances, to be led on by the duplicitous counting of the gamekeeper to "star numbers," on which he neither wins nor loses, but simply doubles his bet, to the "comers" and other devices which involve his wealth, bit by bit, upon the table, and Fate turns down her thumbs in accordance with the quick count of the man behind the game. But this time there was something wrong. The flashy young man laid out his money, placed his bets, cut-counted the fast-counting Sweetie Papa, swept the dice aside before the show owner could verify the addition and claimed his winnings. Neither Blackbird nor Sweetie Papa spoke. One of them, at least, was past speaking. The other showed plainly that silence on the part of Sweetie Papa was all that he deserved. Again the conversation led in the direction of another game, and the only safe one of all, the cologne joint.

Hastily Sweetie Papa explained it. Quite casually he announced the fact that the "biggest ever railroad show" now was exploiting the virtues of the red rose perfume, toilet waters and dressing table luxuries, allotted to each and every county a capital cash county advertising prize. All for a trifling sum it would be possible to obtain for this county and district the advertising possibilities and exclusive agency of the red rose perfume simply through advertising a small amount of peculiarity and acumen. Here was a little box, I tell you, something you're the boss in this town, and you're a big guy. And I tell you, I've got 200 of the red rose perfume, or the rough roughnecks that ever swung a stink tank. Get that? What's more, I haven't liked the looks of this village from the time I saw it this morning. So